

How the Evidence Becomes Proof

How God Chooses Us, While We Still Choose God



Are We Able to Choose God?

I often hear arguments between Christians about the nature of our ability to CHOOSE to believe that 1) There is a God, and 2) Jesus is that God. After all, the scriptures are replete with examples of the apostles urging and demonstrating and providing evidences that Jesus is God. In fact, the scriptures are themselves an eyewitness testimony written in an effort to convince us that God exists and that He came to earth in the form of Jesus Christ. Luke implores his readers to recognize that the life of Jesus is evidentially true:



Luke 1:1-4

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

So, why is Luke trying to convince us that his testimony is true? It sure sounds like he is calling his reader(s) to BELIEVE (make a free will CHOICE), based on the evidence he is about to present! He is calling people to BELIEVE as though they had a free will ability to do so! The scriptures often give us the impression that we have the ability to CHOOSE God:



Joshua 24:15

"...choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

Even Jesus repeatedly calls us to respond to Him as though we have the free will ability to do so:



Matthew 11:28-29

'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.



John 7:17

If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.



John 7:37-39

'If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.'

And the apostles also called people to choose God in a similar way:



Acts 3:18-19

Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord



Acts 16:31-32

They replied, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved-you and your household.'

When people read these passages they often make the assumption that God would never call or encourage or command us to do something that we are unable to do (therefore, we must be able to make a free will choice to believe and repent), but is it really true that God would not command us to do something that we are naturally unable to do? What about the Ten Commandments? God clearly commands us to obey His Laws but we are clearly unable to obey them! What about Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount? Are you able to obey Jesus' teaching? I don't think so (I sure can't do it). So, this argument that God would not command us to do more than we are able does not really square with the teaching of the Bible. God often calls us to do more than we are able.



Are We Incapable of Choosing God?

So while it may sound like we have the ability to choose God on our own, we first have to read the scriptures to see if this is true. The scriptures are clear about the fact that we are so caught up in our evil human nature that we are actually INCAPABLE of choosing God! The Bible repeatedly tells us that our hearts are evil and incapable of understanding the things of God:



Jeremiah 13:23

Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots? Neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil.



Mark 7:21-22

For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly



John 8:43-44

Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire.



Romans 3:9-12

We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all

under sin. As it is written: 'There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.'



Romans 1:18-19

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.



Romans 8:6-8

The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.



1 Corinthians 2:14-16

The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.



Does God Have to Change Our Hearts First?

The Bible teaches that unless God first does a work in our hearts, (unless God first softens our hearts so that we are not completely controlled by our depraved, sinful nature), we will never be able to choose God or believe that Jesus is God. The scriptures teach that God first has to change our hearts and call us to Himself, before we will ever be able to choose to believe. This is the clear teaching of the Old Testament:



Ezekiel 36:26-29

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you will be my people, and I will be your God.

It is also the clear teaching of Jesus, who told his followers that it was God who first changed their hearts and called them, and that it was God who first chose them:



John 6:43-45

"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day."



John 6:63-65

The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. Yet there are some of you who do not believe.' For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who

would betray him. He went on to say, 'This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him.'



John 15:15-16

I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit-fruit that will last.

So which is it? How is it possible that we can choose God, but God actually chooses us? Are these two contradictory notions?



It's Like An Anchovy Pizza!

OK, to better understand the relationship between our choosing and God's choosing, let's use a crazy illustration. Let's suspend our sense of reality for a moment and make a ridiculous presupposition. Let's pretend like the only way a person can be saved is if he or she freely walks in to the nearest pizza joint and orders (of his or her choice) an ANCHOVY pizza! That's it, that's the only way to be saved. Wow, there are an awful lot of us who would simply not get saved, I would guess. I, for one, would never get saved if this was the criteria. I HATE ANCHOVIES. That's all there is to it. I would NEVER walk into a pizza joint and order an anchovy pizza. I would rather starve.

See, by my very nature, I am hostile to the idea of eating these little fish. It disgusts me. I would never CHOOSE this. But, what if my hostility toward anchovies was removed? What if my desires related to anchovies were first changed? Then I would not be hostile toward the very notion of anchovies and I would be in a very different place altogether. If I actually enjoyed this little delicacy, I might be persuaded to entertain the thought of putting one on my pizza! If my hostility was removed toward the little fish, I might consider the idea of eating an anchovy pizza. How about this: what if the hostility was not only removed, but was instead replaced with a newfound LOVE for anchovies? Now, when I walk into the pizza joint, I still might not think of eating an anchovy pizza, but if I looked up and saw one on the menu, I would say, "Hey, I LOVE anchovies, I bet they would be great on a pizza!" I would then be EAGER to eat an anchovy pizza!

In a manner very similar to this, God chooses us while still somehow miraculously and mysteriously allowing us to choose him. He first removes the barrier of hostility that lies in our natural heart toward the things of God. This act (on the part of God) is called REGENERATION. God comes in FIRST, and removes the hostility. He changes and softens our heart. Then when the case for faith is made to us, we get it. It makes sense. We say, "Hey, I never thought of it quite that way!" We see it with new eyes. Regenerate eyes. And we run to God, choosing to believe and surrender. So, God chooses. We choose. The mystery persists, and we are awed by the grace (the unmerited love) of God.



Evidence and Proof

Now, if you think about this process of God's first action in our hearts, it's going to force you to rethink the way you have been witnessing and talking about God to those around you. Have you ever done your best to reason with someone about the truth of the Christian worldview only to have them reject what you are saying? Have you ever done your best to represent the truth about the reliability of the scriptures, the deity of Jesus or the existence of God, just to have someone tell you that they were completely unconvinced? Maybe you felt like you just weren't articulate enough. Maybe you felt like you should have made a better case for the truth. Maybe you felt inadequate. Maybe you felt like it was all up to you, and you failed!

Well, now you know the truth. Now you know that before you can ever convince someone with evidence, God will have to do the work of regenerating the heart of who it is that you are talking to. It's not up to you. That work can only be done by God Himself. And that's the difference between evidence and proof. We can offer evidence all day long: facts about eyewitness testimony, archeological verification and scientific harmony, but NONE of this will serve as PROOF unless God first changes the heart.

Evidence

The facts we offer to support our claims of truth

Proof

What God does in the heart of the listener with the evidence we offer

Yes, we are called to provide the evidence...



1 Peter 3:15

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.

...but only God (through the Holy Spirit) turns this evidence into PROOF. It's that simple:



John 16:8

When he comes (the Holy Spirit), he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment

So why do we bother sharing evidence if only God can turn this evidence into proof? Because we never know when God has removed the hostility in someone's heart. We never know when God has done the softening so that they are open to the message of truth.



Romans 10:14-15

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they

hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'



We Are Kind of Like the Menu

See, as Christians, we are kind of like the menu in the pizza joint. Once God changed my desires related to anchovies, I walked into the restaurant with a new attitude about the little fish and all I needed to see was the menu that offered the anchovy pizza. Of course I chose it! How could I say “no”? But guess what. Without the menu, I wouldn’t even have known about the option. The menu was critically important, and so are we as God’s witnesses.

Never shrink from the opportunity to share your faith. Never neglect your responsibility to know and be able to share the truth. But never blame your self when someone rejects what you are sharing. God simply hasn’t yet softened their heart. Try again later. Come back and share once more. You just never know when God will do the work that opens the door for the truth you have come to know and love.